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ABSTRACT

Seven features of adolescents' relationships with mothers and with fathers (time together per day, number of activities, degree of influence, subjective closeness, and frequency of experiencing positive, hostile, and sad emotions in the relationship) were used to predict adolescents' problem behavior and chemical use. Using a sample of 64 seventh- and 43 tenth-grade adolescents and self-report questionnaires, this study: (1) examined age differences in these features of mother-adolescent and father-adolescent relationships; and (2) investigated whether features of relationships with mothers and with fathers predict adolescents' problem behavior and chemical use. Adolescents' reports of hostile emotions experienced in relationships with mothers and with fathers were significant correlates and predictors of problem behavior and chemical use. For adolescents in both grades, features of relationships with mothers explained more variability in reports of problem behavior. Further, lower levels of parental influence were associated with and predictive of higher levels of problem behavior and chemical use in the tenth-grade sample. These findings suggest that intervention that is targeted at assisting parents in developing and maintaining a less hostile, more positive, active, and supportive parent-adolescent relationship may be warranted. (Author/EV)

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Features of Parent-Adolescent Relationships and Adolescents' Problem Behavior

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ABSTRACT

Seven features of adolescents' relationships with mothers and with fathers (i.e., time together per day, number of activities, degree of influence, subjective closeness, and frequency of experiencing positive, hostile, and sad emotions in the relationship) were used to predict adolescents' problem behavior and chemical use. Using a sample of seventh (N=64) and tenth grade (N=43) adolescents and self-report questionnaires this study (1) examined age differences in these features of mother-adolescent and father-adolescent relationships, and (2) investigated whether features of relationships with mothers and with fathers predict adolescents' problem behavior and chemical use. Adolescents' reports of hostile emotions experienced in relationships with mothers and with fathers were significant correlates and predictors of problem behavior and chemical use. For adolescents in both grades, features of relationships with mothers explained more variability in reports of problem behavior. Further, lower levels of parental influence were associated with and predictive of higher levels of problem behavior and chemical use in the tenth-grade sample. These findings suggest that intervention that is targeted at assisting parents in developing and maintaining a more positive, less hostile, active, and supportive parent-adolescent relationship may be warranted.

INTRODUCTION

Parent-child relationships are transformed during adolescence (Collins & Repinski, 1994; Larson, Richards, Moneta, Holmbeck, & Duckett, 1996). That is, some features of these relationships remain constant whereas other features of these relationships change. For example, Larson and colleagues (1996) reported that the amount of time spent with mothers and with fathers remains stable from early through late adolescence. In addition, adolescents remain warmly attached to parents (e.g., Ellis, 1991; Hill 1987) throughout the adolescent years. In contrast, several studies have shown that during the early adolescent years positive emotional expressions, communication, and reported feelings of closeness between parents and children decline, whereas negative emotional expressions increase (Flannery & Montemayor, 1991; Papini, Roggman, & Anderson, 1991). Further, time spent talking within family subsystems that included mothers was reported to increase across grade (Larson et al., 1996).

In addition to change in the features of parent-adolescent relationships, adolescence is a time during which delinquent behavior escalates and substance abuse is initiated (Feldman & Weinberger, 1994). Some have argued that parenting practices and relationships with mothers and with fathers explain a significant amount of variance in these antisocial behaviors (Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989). In light of these findings, we identified six features of parent-adolescent relationships for study. Specifically, our aims, using a sample of seventh and tenth grade adolescents, were (1) to examine age differences in six features of mother-adolescent and of father-adolescent relationships, and (2) to investigate whether features of relationships with mothers and with fathers predict adolescents' problem behavior and chemical use.

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METHOD

Participants

- 64 seventh grade adolescents (35 male, 29 female) from a rural school
- 43 tenth grade adolescents (15 male, 28 female) from a rural school

Procedure

- All participants received parental consent and were given a stipend of $5.00.
- Self-report data was collected from the participants during a routine day at school.

Measures

Relationship Features

- Adolescents' reports of the average amount of time per day (in minutes) spent alone with either their father or mother during the previous week.
- Adolescents' reports of the number of different activities (from a list of 36 common activities) that they participated in along with their mother or father during the past week (e.g. shopping, fixed a meal).
- Adolescents' average rating of the strength of their mothers' or fathers' influence regarding 45 different domains (e.g. religious practices, TV programs viewed). (1=not at all; 5=a great extent)
- Affective features of the parent-adolescent relationship were measured using adolescents' average ratings of the frequency during the past week with which they experienced six positive emotions (e.g. happy, proud), five hostile emotions (e.g. angry, frustrated), and five sad emotions (e.g. lonely, disappointed) in their relationships with their mothers and fathers. (1=not at all/never; 5=very frequently)
- Subjective closeness of the parent-adolescent relationship was measured using adolescents' summed ratings of their feelings of closeness to each parent on a scale of 1 (not close at all) to 5 (very close) as compared to their other relationships and to their friends' parent-adolescent relationships.

Chemical Use and Problem Behavior

- Adolescents' average rating of the frequency of their use of 11 legal and illegal substances (e.g. alcohol, marijuana).
- Adolescents' average rating of the frequency of their involvement in 21different deviant or problematic behaviors (e.g., threatened to hurt someone).

RESULTS

Grade Differences in Adolescents' Reports (See Table 1)

Relationships with Mothers

- Time with mothers, number of activities with mothers, and mothers' influence were all significantly greater in the seventh grade than in the tenth grade.
- Positive emotions experienced in relationships with mothers were significantly greater in the seventh grade than in the tenth grade.
- Hostile emotions experienced in relationships with mothers were significantly greater in the tenth grade than in the seventh grade.

Relationships with Fathers

- Time with fathers, number of activities with fathers, and fathers' influence were all significantly greater in the seventh grade than in the tenth grade.
- Positive emotions and closeness experienced in relationships with fathers were both significantly greater in the seventh grade than in the tenth grade.

Criterion Variables

- Tenth-grade participants reported significantly more chemical use and problem behavior than did seventh-grade participants.

Correlational Analyses (See Table 2)

Seventh-graders' reports

- Hostile emotions experienced in relationships with mothers and sad emotions experienced in relationships with fathers were positively correlated with chemical use.
- Hostile and sad emotions experienced in relationships with both mothers and fathers were positively correlated with problem behavior.
- Positive emotions experienced in relationships with both mothers and fathers were negatively correlated with problem behavior.
- Number of activities with fathers, fathers' influence and reports of closeness in relationships with fathers were all negatively correlated with problem behavior.

Tenth-graders' reports

- Hostile emotions experienced in relationships with both mothers and fathers were positively correlated with chemical use.
- Positive emotions and closeness experienced in relationships with fathers were both negatively correlated with chemical use.
- Mothers' and fathers' influence were negatively correlated with chemical use.
- Hostile emotions experienced in relationships with both mothers and fathers were positively correlated with problem behavior.
- Positive emotions experienced in relationships with mothers were negatively correlated with problem behavior.
- The number of activities with mothers, mothers' influence, and closeness experienced in relationships with mothers were all negatively correlated with problem behavior.
- The number of activities with fathers was negatively correlated with problem behavior.

Regression Results – (see Table 3)

Features of parent-adolescent relationships that were significantly associated with the criterion variables at the bivariate level were entered into separate regression equations for mothers and for fathers in order to evaluate the relative and combined contributions of the specific relationships features to the prediction of adolescents' problem behavior and chemical use.

Predicting Chemical Use

Tenth-graders' reports

- Features of relationships with mothers predicted 20% of the variance in adolescents' reports of chemical use.
  - At the level of a statistically significant trend, both mothers' influence and hostile emotions experienced in relationships with mothers were unique contributors to this prediction.

- Features of relationships with fathers predicted 20% of the variance in adolescents' reports of chemical use.
  - Fathers' influence emerged as a significant, unique predictor of tenth-graders' chemical use.

Predicting Problem Behavior

Seventh-graders' reports

- Features of relationships with mothers predicted 24% of the variance in adolescents' reports of problem behavior.
  - Hostile emotions experienced in relationships with mothers made a significant, unique contribution to this prediction.

Tenth-graders' reports

- Features of relationships with mothers predicted 26% of the variance in adolescents' reports of problem behavior.
  - The experience of hostile emotions in relationships with mothers was a unique contributor to this prediction.

- Features of relationships with fathers predicted 16% of the variance in adolescents' reports of problem behavior.
  - Hostile emotions experienced in relationships with fathers were a significant, unique predictor of problem behavior.

DISCUSSION

- Adolescents' reports of hostile emotions experienced in relationships with mothers and with fathers were significantly correlated with problem behavior and chemical use. Moreover, hostile emotions experienced in relationships with mothers emerged as a significant, unique predictor of the criterion variables for adolescents in both grades. These findings highlight the salience for adolescents of experiencing hostile emotions in relationships with parents. Possible explanations for this finding include:
  - Based on the socialization that occurs at home, the hostile emotions experienced in relationships with parents could carry over and be manifest in adolescents' relationships with friends and peers. This may lead to adolescents being rejected by their peers and eventually socializing with other rejected and at-risk adolescents (e.g., Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989).
  - Adolescents often view their parents' values as being a reflection of societal values. If adolescents frequently experience hostility in the parent-adolescent relationship, they may be more likely to reject those values and adopt more deviant, and socially unacceptable patterns of behavior (Waters, Hay & Richters, 1985).

- Low levels of parental influence were associated with and predictive of higher levels of problem behavior and chemical use in the tenth-grade sample. Low levels of parental influence may be an additional manifestation of a permissive parenting style wherein parents are low in the degree to which they attempt to monitor, supervise, or control their adolescent. A permissive parenting style has been correlated with an increased risk for adolescents' involvement in deviant behavior (Steinberg, Lamborn, Darling, Mounts, & Dornbusch, 1994).

- Features of relationships with mothers and with fathers for tenth grade adolescents, as compared to those for seventh-graders, allowed for better prediction of variability in reports of chemical use. This difference may be due, in part, to less variability and a lower average level of chemical use reported by the seventh grade participants.

- For adolescents in both grades seven and ten, features of relationships with mothers explained more variability in their reports of problem behavior. This may be due to the greater involvement and influence of mothers in the lives of adolescents (Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Adolescents report experiencing both more positive and more negative emotions in relationships with mothers (Repinski, 1993). In addition, mothers are more likely than fathers to be "in-charge" and to set limits and turn down requests (Holmbeck & Hill, 1991).

- The present findings point to the significance of features of adolescents' relationships with mothers and fathers in explaining differences in adolescents' problem behavior and chemical use. These findings suggest that intervention that is targeted at assisting parents in developing and maintaining a more positive, less hostile, active, and supportive parent-adolescent relationship may be warranted.

- To better understand the etiology of adolescents' problem behavior and chemical use, it may be valuable to expand the relationships considered and examine the significance of adolescents' relationships with friends and peers.

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Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations for the Study Variables

	Seventh Grade		Tenth Grade	
	M	SD	M	SD
Relationships with Mothers				
Time**	461.7	33.4	321.8	38.5
Activities**	13.6	.8	10.2	.9
Influence**	3.4	.01	2.8	.1
Positive Emotions**	4	.1	3.5	.1
Hostile Emotions**	7.8	.5	10	.5
Sad Emotions	6.9	.4	8.1	.5
Subjective Closeness	8.3	.3	7.5	.3
Relationships with Fathers				
Time*	283.1	25.9	181.1	29.73
Activities**	10.1	.9	5.8	1
Influence**	2.9	.1	2.2	.2
Positive Emotions*	3.5	.2	3	.2
Hostile Emotions	8.1	.7	9.7	.8
Sad Emotions	7.3	.5	7.3	.6
Subjective Closeness*	7.1	.3	5.9	.4
Criterion Variables				
Chemical Use**	1.2	.3	2	.8
Problem Behavior**	1.2	.3	1.6	.5

Note: *p<.05, **p<.01, denote significant grade differences for the variable

Table 2: Intercorrelations for the Study Variables

	Seventh Grade		Tenth Grade	
	Chemical Use	Problem Behavior	Chemical Use	Problem Behavior
Relationships with Mothers				
Time	07	-08	-12	-28
Activities	02	-19	-18	-44**
Influence	-23	-25	-35*	-45**
Positive Emotions	-19	-28*	-15	-43**
Hostile Emotions	35**	48**	43**	51**
Sad Emotions	20	44**	01	29
Subjective Closeness	-14	-11	-26	-32*
Relationships with Fathers				
Time	-12	-04	-10	-05
Activities	-12	-29*	-30	-32*
Influence	-16	-28*	-40*	-30
Positive Emotions	-12	-33**	-37*	-30
Hostile Emotions	26	40**	43**	38*
Sad Emotions	29*	34*	26	25
Subjective Closeness	-24	-27*	-33*	-14

Note: *=p≤.05; **=p≤.01

Table 3: Standardized Regression Coefficients for Predicting Seventh and Tenth Grade Adolescents' Reports of Chemical Use and Problem Behavior from Features of Relationships with Mothers and with Fathers

	7th Graders' Chemical Use		7th Graders' Problem Behavior		10th Graders' Chemical Use		10th Graders' Problem Behavior	
Relationships with Mothers	*β*	*Adjusted R^2*	*β*	*Adjusted R^2*	*β*	*Adjusted R^2*	*β*	*Adjusted R^2*
		.11**		.24***		.20**		.26**
Time	-		-		-		-	
Activities	-		-		-		-.30	
Influence	-		-		-.29+		-.22	
Positive Emotions	-		-.09		-		-.12	
Hostile Emotions	.35**		.36*		.29+		.44*	
Sad Emotions	-		23		-		.14	
Subjective Closeness	-		-		-		-	
Relationships with Fathers		.07*		.10		.20*		.16*
Time	-		-		-		-	
Activities	-		-.04		-		-.25	
Influence	-		-.08		-.37*		-	
Positive Emotions	-		-		-.12		-	
Hostile Emotions	-		.17		.26		.29*	
Sad Emotions	.29*		.09		-		-	
Subjective Closeness	-		-.15		-.12		-	

Note. * = $p \leq .05$; ** = $p \leq .01$